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THE ASSAULT OF
Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery
AND
Colonel Benedict Arnold
ON QUEBEC IN 1775

A RED LETTER DAY IN THE ANNALS OF CANADA

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VI.—*The Assault of Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery and Colonel Benedict Arnold on Quebec in 1775. A Red letter Day in the Annals of Canada.*

By SIR JAMES M. LEMOINE.

(Read May 25, 1899.)

Every country has in its history particular dates which, after a lapse of years, become, so to speak, crystallized in the minds of the people. One may mark a victory; another may commemorate a defeat; a third, record a public calamity. Champlain's old fortress is no exception to the rule.

It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the annalist, in the accomplishment of his sacred trust, should give a true record of past events, sparing neither time nor research in unravelling the tangled web of the occasionally obscure, dry-as-dust documents on which a date may rest.

The day when Quebec's brave defenders saved the province to the British crown, in 1775, is without doubt, by its far-reaching results, one of those unforgettable epochs in its history.

It was accordingly a surprise to me, on perusing Dr. Kingsford's elaborate work on Canada, to find that so far I had wrongly read history; that, in fact, the gallant surviving militia-officers, who annually for more than twenty seasons commemorated within our walls by a public banquet (of which such flourishing accounts occurred in Neilson's "Quebec Gazette") the repulse of Montgomery and Arnold at Près-de-Ville and the Sault-au-Matelot, had seemingly forgotten the exact day on which they had fought and won; that the glorious date I had taken especial pride in recording in many of my works was wrong; that the innumerable despatches, letters, memoirs and diaries left by eye-witnesses, or by reliable writers were also wrong as to the time of the fight; that, in fact, the ever-memorable assault had taken place, not on the morning of the 31st of December, 1775, as was generally believed, but on that of the 1st of January, 1776.

The doctor's statement, which had startled many other students of Canadian history besides myself, caused me to look up the historical sources on which my opinion was based.

In order to elucidate the subject fully I decided to consult other writers on Canadian annals, such as Rev. Abbé H. Verreault, of Montreal, and Dr. N. E. Dionne, of Quebec, both fellows of our society. I also resolved to have searches made in the archives and libraries of the United States.

As a preliminary, it occurred to me to look up the Roman Catholic parish church register of Quebec, considered so justly a reliable and accurate record of marriages, births and deaths since the foundation of the colony.

I therein read of the burial of a French Canadian, by name Louis Vallerand, on the 1st January, 1776; the said Vallerand was killed at the engagement at Quebec the day previous, viz., the 31st December, 1775.

"Le premier janvier 1776, par nous, vicaire de Québec, soussigné, a été inhumé dans le cimetière de la Sainte-Famille le corps de Louis Vallerand, tué dans l'attaque livrée le trente et un décembre, âgé de vingt-cinq ans environ. Ont été présents Pierre-André Spénard, François Sasseville et plusieurs autres.

"(Signé) LEFEBVRE, *Ptre.*"

This entry alone, as Dr. Dionne observes, suffices to overturn Dr. Kingsford's theory.

In order to abridge the array of authorities which can be put forth on the task before me I shall, with Dr. Dionne's permission, confine myself to quote the leading authorities contained in his able dissertation, in addition to my own.

The doctor, after alluding to the accounts of the banquets commemorating the repulse of Montgomery and Arnold, to be found in the columns of the old "Quebec Gazette," 1776, 1779, etc., says: "The 'Quebec Herald' of the 14th January, 1790, mentions the annual banquet as follows: 'Thursday last, being the 31st December, the Veterans held their annual dinner.'" He quotes an extract of a letter written six days after the engagement by General Wooster to Colonel Warner, both distinguished officers of the Continental army.

"With the greatest distress of mind," writes the general, "I now sit down to inform you of the event of an unfortunate attack made upon Quebec between the hours of four and six of the morning of the 31st December last."

Then comes a passage taken from the journal of an English officer present at the siege, and inserted in W. Smith's "History of Canada," as follows: "31st December, Mr. Montgomery, with 900 of the best men, attacked Près-de-Ville, and Arnold, with 700 chosen fellows, attacked at Sault-au-Matelot."

We have next the statement of an eye-witness, one who saw all that took place before, pending and after the assault of December, 1775, viz., an extract of a pastoral letter from no less a personage than the Roman Catholic bishop of Quebec, Monseigneur Briand. It is dated 29th December, 1776. This dignitary takes occasion to recall the memorable engagement, as a subject for congratulation, to his flock. "What," says his lordship, "are our feelings on the happy and glorious event of the 31st December, 1775."

Bishop Briand, a resident of Quebec, surely could not have been mistaken as to the date in alluding to such a recent occurrence!

Dr. Dionne also puts forth an important document, the text of the inscription on Richard Montgomery's tombstone at St. Paul's Church, New York, showing "31st December, 1775," as the date of his death. This inscription was prepared by Benjamin Franklin. Is it likely that such an eminent man as Dr. Franklin should have inserted this date thoughtlessly and without consulting well-informed persons on this subject?

Among United States travellers who have published books on the campaign of 1775 Dr. Dionne mentions the following: Sanson,¹ Silliman,² and a well-known American writer on the battles of 1775-81, Henry B. Carrington, who says: "It was not until the night of the thirtieth, when but one day of legal service remained for a large portion of the troops, that the preparations were complete;"³ that is, that the preparations for the assault were completed only during the night of the thirtieth, when one day alone of legal service remained for the greater portion of the troops.

It was, then, indispensable not to wait for the 1st January to make the assault, as the term of service of a large portion of the soldiers expired with the end of the year. (Bancroft's "History of the United States," vol. vii, p. 121.)

Ill-clad, ill-fed, Montgomery's followers were little inclined for a winter campaign, fraught with exposure and suffering. Many longed to return to their homes.

Perauld,⁴ Bibaud,⁵ Smith,⁶ Hawkins,⁷ and Garneau,⁸ who wrote at the beginning of the century, and who could easily collect the traditions of the past, are unanimous in fixing to the 31st December, 1775, the attack on Quebec.

"Then," adds Dr. Dionne, "all the recent writers on this thrilling period agree in recording the assault on Quebec as taking place on the 31st December, 1775—Charles Rogers,⁹ who wrote in 1856, Rev. W. H. Withrow,¹⁰ James M. LeMoine,¹¹ L. P. Turcotte,¹² and Faucher de St. Maurice."

¹ "Sketches of Lower Canada, Historical and Descriptive, with the Author's Recollections, 1817," p. 631.

² "Remarks made on a Short Tour between Hartford and Quebec in the Autumn of 1819-1820," p. 284.

³ "Battles of the American Revolution, 1775-81," p. 134.

⁴ "Abrégé d'Histoire du Canada, 2ème partie," p. 117.

⁵ "Histoire du Canada et des Canadiens sous la Domination Anglaise," p. 67.

⁶ "History of Canada," ii, 161.

⁷ "Picture of Quebec," p. 427.

⁸ "Histoire du Canada, 1ère édition, 1848," t. iii, p. 436.

⁹ "The Rise of Canada from Barbarism to Wealth and Civilization," p. 62.

¹⁰ "A Popular History of the Dominion of Canada, 1885," p. 279.

¹¹ "I. Album de Touriste," pp. 33, 70, et suiv.

¹² "Invasion du Canada et Siège de Québec, 1775-76, 1876," p. 47.

In reply to a communication I addressed to a literary friend across the border, Mr. Edward Denham, of New Bedford, Massachusetts, drawing his attention to Dr. Kingsford's error, I received a voluminous memoir, disclosing considerable research through the United States libraries and archives.

With his permission, I herewith subjoin the leading authorities set forth :

"Colonel Donald Campbell to General Wooster, dated Holland House (near Quebec), Saturday, December 31, 1775 :

'DEAR SIR,—It is with the greatest distress of mind that I have the task of communicating to you the event of an important attempt that was made to storm the town of Quebec between the hours of two and seven this morning, by four different attacks. * * * *

'Thus you have had the four attacks that were concerted between our dear deceased General Montgomery and Colonel Arnold, which was for many respects hurried from the circumstance of the enlistment of the troops under Colonel Arnold, whose service expires this day.'

"Here we have December 31, but the day is called Saturday, which should have been Sunday. Here we also have the information that the attack was hurried, because the term for which the troops enlisted had nearly expired, which I have also seen elsewhere.

"The Journal of Captain Simeon Thayer, from September 11, 1775, to August 12, 1776, published in the 'Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society,' vol. vi, Providence, 1867, pp. 2 to 5, says :

'December 30.—The enemy kept up a smart fire all day on St. Roques, but done little or no damage. This evening received orders that the General determined to storm the city this night, ordering our men to get their arms in readiness. It was very dark and snowed. The plan was as follows.' * * *

"The 'Historical Magazine, second series,' vol. vi, October, 1869, p. 249, contains an extract of a letter from Adam Bainfair, master of the 'Fell' transport ship, to his owner in Whitby, dated Quebec, May 15, 1776 :

'We have got the troubles of this winter over, and have kept the town of Quebec in spite of our enemies. * * * Before this comes to hand you will hear of our town been attacked on the 31st December, when I had the honour to command at that part where the grand attack was made, and had the fortune of killing the General and his Aid-de-Camp by the first guns I fired, which was a great means of saving the garrison.' * * *

"This letter is taken from the 'Middlesex Journal,' London, June 22, 1776, and is in the 'Historical Magazine,' as mentioned above.

"On the day before the attack Major John MacPherson wrote a letter to his father, stating that the order was given to storm the city that night. His brother held a commission in the British army, and he refers to him in the letter. He also directed that his letter should be sent to his

parents if he did not survive the assault, and as he did not, it was forwarded by General Philip Schuyler. The letter is dated and reads:

'HEADQUARTERS BEFORE QUEBEC, December 30, 1775.

'MY DEAR FATHER,—If you receive this, it will be the last this hand will ever write you. Orders are given for a general storm of Quebec this night, and heaven only knows what may be my fate. * * * Should Providence, in its wisdom, call me from rendering the little assistance I might to my country, I could wish my brother did not continue in the service of her enemies.'

"This letter, copied from the 'Philadelphia Press,' October 30, 1830, will be found in full in the 'Historical Magazine,' second series, vol. viii, July, 1870, p. 53.

"In the two preceding extracts we have a letter from Bainfair (Barnesfair), who participated in the fight on the British side, and a letter from MacPherson, who was killed. The former distinctly gives December 31st as the date of the battle. The latter, writing on the 30th, says orders are given 'to storm Quebec this evening.' That points to the 31st as the day of the battle as plainly as possible.

"Turning to those who kept diaries or journals, I take up that which I find in the 'Publications of the New York Historical Society' for the year 1880. It is entitled, 'Journal of the Most Remarkable Occurrences in Quebec from the 24th of November, 1775, to the 7th of May, 1776. By One of the Garrison.' The author of the journal I do not know, but will quote part of one day and part of another.

'December 30.— * * * In the night a deserter came in from the rebels. He reports that the army under Mr. Montgomery amounts to between two and three thousand men, including Canadians; that they have been newly clothed, and are most plentifully supplied by the country people, who are paid in hard money. * * * The whole army was assembled at headquarters, by the General's order, lately. It was given out that they were to attack the town that night. * * *

'December 31.—About four o'clock this morning Captain Malcolm Fraser, of Colonel Maclean's Regiment, in going his rounds, perceived signals not far from St. John's Gate; and finding the weather such as the enemy wished for, by the last deserter's report, he alarmed the guards and picquets, who stood to their arms. All the sentries between Cape Diamond and Palace Gate saw many and repeated flashes like lightning. On the Heights of Abraham lights like lanterns were placed on poles at regular distances.' * * *

"The above gives December 31st, tells that the deserter gave them information that the city was to be attacked, and the kind of weather Montgomery desired he had.

"I next turn to the 'Journal of Return J. Meigs from September 9, 1775, to January 1, 1776,' as it is given in the 'Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society,' second series, vol. ii, pp. 227-247, and find:

'December 31.—The troops assembled at two o'clock this morning. Those that were to make the attack by way of Cape Diamond assembled at the General's quarters upon the Heights of Abraham, and were headed by General Montgomery.'

"Next we turn to the 'Journal of Joseph Ware, of Needham, Mass., published in the 'New England Historical and Genealogical Register,' April, 1852, p. 132.

'Sunday, December 30 and 31.—It began to thicken up towards night and snowed very much. We were ordered to be in readiness, and at two o'clock at night we were mustered and got all fit for scaling the walls, and marched near to the city, some with ladders, some with axes and some with saws; General Montgomery, with his forces, on the one quarter, and Colonel Arnold on the other hand.'

"Now here the diarist speaks of the night of December 30-31, and tells us that he was called out at two o'clock, which was the morning of the 31st, and later mentions what happens. At five began the attack, and later, the retreat.

"William H. Whitmore, in the 'American Genealogist,' Albany, 1878, p. 74, says this journal of Ware's is claimed in the 'Book of the Looker' to have been written by Ebenezer Tolman, who was in the expedition. Whitmore also refers to an earlier edition of his 'American Genealogist,' 1868, pages 84-5, for further information about this Tolman's claims. I have not the book, so I cannot look up the facts. However, whoever wrote the book, December 31st is the date named for the fight.

"The 'Journal of Captain John Dearborn,' edited by Camberlain, and published in the 'Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society' for April, 1886, pp. 275-305, says:

'December 31.—This morning at four o'clock I was informed by one of my men that there was orders from the General for making the attack upon Quebec this morning. I was surprised that I had not been informed or notified sooner; but afterwards found it was owing to the neglect of the Sergeant-Major, who excused himself by saying he could not get across the river. * * * The General gave orders last evening for the troops to assemble at two o'clock this morning to make the attack in the following manner.' * * *

"General Wooster to Colonel Warren, in a letter dated Montreal, January 6, 1776:

'With the greatest distress of mind, I now sit down to write of the event of an unfortunate attack made on Quebec between the hours of four and six on the morning of the 31st of December,' etc.

"The above is taken from Force's 'American Archives,' 4th series, vol. iv, p. 588. It is also in 'Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New York,' edited by O'Callaghan, vol. viii, 664.

"General John Sullivan says, in a letter to the Assembly of New Hampshire, dated Winter Hill, January 18, 1776:

'It is with the most sensible pain I sit down to write you the melancholy tidings of our army being defeated at Quebec on the 31st of December, with the loss of one hundred and fifty.'

"Taken from Peter Force's 'American Archives,' 4th series, vol. iv, p. 768.

"General Schuyler, in a letter to the President of Congress, dated Albany, January 13, 1776, six o'clock :

'Within this half hour Mr. Antill arrived with the unfortunate account in the inclosed. My amiable and gallant friend General Montgomery is no more ; he fell in an unsuccessful attack on Quebec on the 30th ultimo.'

"Peter Force, 'American Archives,' iv, p. 666.

"From the 'Journal of Colonel Rodolphus Ritzema, of the First New York Regiment, August 8th, 1775, to July 30th, 1778' (from the original in the 'Collection of the New York Historical Society,' published in the 'Magazine of American History,' vol. i, February, 1877, pp. 98-107). The author is at Montreal at the time he writes :

'January 3, 1776.—Mr. Antill arrived here by express from Quebec, with intelligence that General Montgomery, on the 31st ultimo, between the hours of six and seven in the morning (after a previous disposition of his small army), made two attacks upon the lower town, under a feint, and upon the upper.' * * * *

"In the series of Force's 'Archives,' vol. ix, p. 707, in a letter which appeared in the 'New York Gazette'; the author of the letter I do not know, as it is signed with pseudonym 'A Soldier,' who wrote from Montreal :

'As the public have no doubt received many contradictory accounts relative to the unfortunate attempt against Quebec, on the 31st of December last, * * * I have sent you for publication the following sketch.'

"James Melvin, an actor in the assault on Quebec, and taken prisoner at Sault-au-Matelot, on 31st December, 1775, writes ('Melvin's Journal,' p. 11) :

'31st December, Sunday.—About four in the morning we mustered in order to storm the town.

'1st January, 1776.—Prisoner in Quebec.'

"'The Account of the Repulse our Troops met with in their attempt at Quebec, the 31st of December, 1775.' This report is dated January 24, and says :

'The letters from Canada bring an account of an unsuccessful attempt made to gain possession of Quebec by storm on the 31st December last, between the hours of two and seven in the morning.'

"In a letter which Governor Tryon wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth, dated 'Ship Dutchess of Gordon, off New York, 8th February, 1776' :

'I am happy to have an opportunity to communicate to your Lordship the victory obtained by General Carleton over the rebel forces before Quebec on the 31st of December last, in which action the commander was slain.'

"Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New York,' edited by O'Callaghan, vol. viii, p. 672.

"The reply to this is given by Lord Germain in a letter to Governor Tryon, dated Whitehall, 28th March, 1776 :

'The severe check the rebels met with on the 31st December before the walls of Quebec, of which fortunate event we received the first intelligence from you, has, I trust, secured to his Majesty the possession of that fortress,' etc.

"From 'Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New York,' edited by O'Callaghan, vol. viii, p. 672.

"'The Annual Register' for 1776, vol. xix, chap. i, p. 13, says:

' * * * However that was, early in the morning, on the last day of the year 1775, and under cover of a violent snow-storm, he proceeded to his arduous attempt.'

"I have already referred to William Smith's oration, in which is the date December 31, 1775, and which was published at least twice, separately. I have never seen either of the original editions, but it is given in full in Peter Force, iv, pp. 1675-1684. The monument erected in New York, at the rear of St. Paul's Chapel, gives the date of his death as December 31, 1775. The inscription upon it is given in Lorrington's 'Field-Book,' vol. i, p. 201, and blunders in regard to his age, which it says is '37.' As he was born December 3, 1736, he had just completed his 39th year."

Such are some of the authorities in support of the generally accepted date of the attack on Quebec in December, 1775, by the troops of Congress—the date put forth by the eminent historian, George Bancroft, in his "History of the United States of America," vol. vii, p. 131.

Let us see the documents on which Dr. W. Kingsford rests his theory in volume vi, page 33, of his "History of Canada." Quoting Finlay's "Journal," the doctor wrote:

"31st December.—Wind N.E., very stormy and dark. As Captain Malcolm Fraser, of the Emigrants, who that night commanded the main guard," etc.

"Caldwell writes: 'They (the Congress troops) remained until the 31st December. About five o'clock in the morning we were alarmed at our picket by Captain Fraser, who was captain of the main guard,' etc.

"Mr. James Thompson, who, as engineer, carried on the work of increasing the fortifications, and lived to be 98, dying on the 30th August, 1830, describes two assaults on the night of the 31st of December, 1775, or rather the morning of the 1st January, as the time when Arnold approached Palace Gate" (p. 113).

"Badeaux (Verrault, p. 182) gives the same date. 'Enfin, ne trouvant aucun moyen pour entrer dans la ville, il forma l'escalade le premier jour de l'année 1776, à quatre heures du matin.'"

"The error," Dr. Kingsford adds, "apparently has arisen from Sanguinet having described the event as taking place '*le trente et un de décembre 1775, à cinq heures du matin.*' Sanguinet was, however, at the time at Montreal, and whatever the expression may mean, he cannot be accepted as an authority for what took place during the siege."

Let us now sift the foregoing evidence adduced by Dr. Kingsford.

Finlay's testimony seems to us anything but conclusive as favouring Dr. Kingsford's assumption, especially when read in conjunction with the statement of Colonel Caldwell, which immediately follows it, and which mentions five o'clock in the morning of the 31st December as the hour when Captain Fraser gave the alarm.

Old Sergeant James Thompson, stonemason and "overseer of the works," as foreman, not as engineer, and who lived to be 98, dying on

the 30th August, 1830, who left a diary which he dictated to his son, James Thompson, Jr., on the 31st July, 1828, two years before his death, can scarcely be accepted as a sufficient authority; the memory of nonagenarians attaining 96 years being liable to become faulty. This supposition becomes a certainty on referring to another passage in his diary, dictated also on the 31st July, 1828, wherein it is said that "on the 31st December, before daylight, General Montgomery made an attempt at assault by Près-de-Ville and Sault-au-Matlot," etc., "where he and two of his officers and a sergeant were shot dead by a single discharge," etc.

Guy Carleton, commander-in-chief, in a letter to General Howe, Quebec, 12th January, 1776, relates the attack as being made on the 31st December, 1775.

The evidence of Henry, a volunteer in the troops of Congress, taken prisoner on the 31st December, 1775, quoted by Kingsford, is open to suspicion, as his presumed diary or memoir, instead of being in his handwriting, was dictated to his daughter thirty-seven years later, viz., in 1812, as appears by the following: "The campaign against Quebec was dictated to his daughter Ann Mary, the mother of the writer, with the aid of casual notes and memoranda, from his (Henry's) bed of sickness—his latest years. The manuscript received no revision at his hands, for he was called away shortly after the pages were written. His widow gave it to the press in 1812, and it was printed without even a correction of verbal or typographical errors." ("Account of Arnold's Campaign against Quebec," published by Maunsell, Albany, 1817.)

Sanguinet, a member of the Montreal Bar, who left what has ever been held a copious and reliable journal of the siege operations of 1775, and who places the assault on the morning of the 31st December, visited Quebec in May, 1776, when the particulars of the attack were fresh in everyone's mind. According to Dr. Kingsford he cannot be accepted as an authority for what took place during the siege, on account of his absence!

The doctor, however, accepts the version of the journal attributed to Badeaux, a Three Rivers notary, though Badeaux no more than Sanguinet was present at Quebec on the day of the engagement. The doctor, however, in Badeaux's case forgot, or did not choose to add, that on the margin of Badeaux's manuscript, in Badeaux's own handwriting, occurs the correction "31 décembre, 1775," and that the learned Jacques Viger, the antiquary, who owned Badeaux's manuscript journal, inscribed under the correction the words "Et c'est vrai. (J. V.)," his initials.

Another work highly prized for its historic value, Hawkins' "Picture of Quebec," published in 1834, with the joint collaboration of the scholarly Dr. John Charlton Fisher, of the learned Andrew Stuart, Q.C., and the late Judge Adam Tom, fixes the date of Montgomery and Arnold's assault on Quebec on the 31st December, 1775.

In 1834 these eminent men had special facilities to inform themselves of the date, as they had numbered among their contemporaries eye-witnesses of the battle, such as Sergeant J. Thompson and others.

Taking into consideration the array of authorities available to the analyst of that period, it seems to me a matter of regret that such an industrious writer as Dr. Kingsford could not find the time to extend the field of his researches, and should have taken on himself, on the slender evidence he adduces, to alter the date of the assault on Quebec in 1775, as given by Bancroft and other reliable historians.

NOTE.—Since the above was written, historical works of undoubted merit otherwise have been published with Dr. Kingsford's erroneous date as to Montgomery and Arnold's assault on Quebec in 1775. There can be no doubt that the enemy, mustering at their respective headquarters very late on the night of the 30th December, were marching on the slumbering city at early dawn and before on the 31st of December, 1775.